

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
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By
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PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN
PAINTING
DEPARTMENT OF ART AND DESIGN

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

Final Visual Presentation

Submitted by Colin John Birnie in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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What does it mean to have faith? What remains to believe in after the grand narratives of religion have been brought to task? *faith in the machine* is the result of my interest in the search for faith during this period in contemporary culture. I am not directly challenging the significance of conventional dogma rather I am examining what a search for meaning entails in our culture *in this time*. With this body of work, I have endeavored to explore the many forms of spirituality as a new-found pluralism. Sociologists have approached the study of religion by separating it into four basic elements: belief systems, participation in ritual, subjective experience and the involvement of a community (Gelles et al.)¹; each representing a necessary building-block of a faith. It is my hypothesis that each element, often devoid of an overt narrative structure, exists and is deeply embedded in our culture. I have developed work to address these elements individually and have used the site of the gallery to contain them: four elements, four spaces. Through painting, I have explored each for its relevance to contemporary culture, and nowhere is cultural *relevance* more evident than through the medium of the Internet. It is not the Internet as a modernist belief system that interests me, but its exposure of the *search*. Although this technology has not delivered on much of its promise, the Internet is a direct connection to the current of contemporary thought and expression, a nerve centre for human dialogue of an unprecedented scale. Through this body of work, it is my intention to tap this nerve.

Images on the Internet flow like a torrent. Search engines enable seemingly endless associations, unpredictable connections that bind language and experience. Text

¹ Gelles, Richard and Ann Levine. *Sociology: An Introduction* 6th Ed. McGraw Hill College: Boston, c1999.

such as “god” or “sublime” or “religious experience” connects a vast array of human events beyond the traditional definitions of these terms: resulting in images of dogs and tattoos and hot-sauce, for example. In *faith in the machine* I have exclusively used these images to illustrate the immediacy with which this technology processes contemporary culture. In the medium in which they are contained, they do not physically exist, ephemeral icons to the human experience. I am interested in the way in which the materiality of paint changes the image’s presence in our space. I see this not as a space of reverence, but contemplation.

I believe in paint, in the *painted* image. I believe that the language of figuration connects most directly to human experiences that exist beyond the boundaries of the canvas, beyond the visual information represented. The ubiquitous *image* is altered, re-coded, by the practice of painting, filtered through the process. In my work painting is not about the creation of a likeness, this can now be done in much more efficient ways. I paint to provide a stage from which to question our image-based culture while still being an integral part of that culture. And for me, nothing is more vital to this task than the medium of encaustic paint. Reading as more than simply liquid colour, encaustic exposes the materiality of paint and the physical struggle of the process; through the surface, the human presence is palpable. To me, this is what painting *is*, its relevance. Encaustic is the ritual of painting laid bare: decisions, revisions, attempts and failures, all visible in the final surface. There is no direct line to realization, no direct answers. However, I believe that painting must ask the big questions, about what it means to be alive, to be human, *in this time*.

Birnie employs old techniques, newer images in study of faith

Gilbert Bouchard



Faith is a complicated and wide-ranging subject for painter Colin Birnie.

In his *Faith in the Machine* exhibition at the FAB Gallery, images evoked in the exploration of human spirituality and belief include a robot, a Neanderthal, an X-ray of a skull and images plucked from plastic surgery websites.

While not wanting to directly challenge conventional religious dogma in his wax-based encaustic paintings, the artist does want to encourage viewers to think about how the idea of belief has expanded in contemporary times.

The paintings of the Neanderthal and X-rays, for example, are in the show to remind us of how important the belief in scientific constructs like evolution and medicine have become in our view of ourselves as a species and as individuals.

As for the plastic surgery images: "when I was looking at the idea of religious ritual, I asked myself what the contemporary version of a baptism would be," says Birnie.

"Then I stumbled across a plastic surgery website and realized this was a way our bodies were interacting with technology in service of refurbishing ourselves. Plastic surgery patients talk about how they want their outsides to match their insides, which for me is what baptism is."

Not only is Birnie juxtaposing old and contemporary concepts of faith in his show, he's also abutting old and new artistic media. While many of the images are based on digital photos, all the paintings are created using encaustic medium (pigments suspended in hot wax) perfected by the ancient Greeks 24 centuries ago.

"It's a beautiful medium and because it's so easy to layer it embodies that sense of memory I'm looking for in my work. Some of the oldest encaustic images we have are ancient Egyptian mummy portraits meant to capture for eternity the memory of the deceased."

Music, nature, art

Upstairs from Birnie's exhibit, Calgary-based artist Derek Besant is documenting his feelings about migration in a collaborative work called *Archeopteryx*.

This tinted gesso, hybrid text-image work started its existence during an artist's residency in Quebec seven years ago at the Fondation Derouin, just outside of Montreal.

"The organizers invited various scientists — a geographer, a geologist, a cartographer — as well as writers, a



Colin Birnie juxtaposes works of faith and science in his art.

PREVIEW

Colin Birnie's Faith in the Machine

and

Derek Besant's Archeopteryx

Showing at: FAB Gallery, main floor,
U of A Fine Arts Building,
89th Avenue and 112th Street

Until: Nov. 13. Birnie is giving an artist talk today at 1 p.m. in Room 2-20, Fine Arts Building. Besant is giving an artist talk at 3:30 p.m. on Nov. 9 in the same location.

poet, a composer and three visual artists," he says, adding that the theme of the gathering was *la sonorité de lieu* (the resonance of the place).

"One of the composers (Michel Gonville) brought in a working score based on an analysis of 30 migratory bird calls which caught my attention because I was working with birds, insects and plant life."

"When he rolled out his rough musical

score, being that I don't read music, it seemed like a drawing to me. While he was looking at the score and vocalizing it like a language, I was looking at distances, groupings and relationships completely on a visual level like a map."

The two decided to collaborate on a joint project which would comprise the score and a series of 100 bird-related images.

Expanding the idea of migration to the human realm, Besant decided to write and embody a complicated two-way text into the visual images.

The text, which can be read left to right or right to left, tells two stories: one about a woman contemplating a west to east cross-country move and the other about a man making an east to west migration.

"I started the series copying out the score by hand and then I spent a year drawing and recording birdlife at two wildlife reserves, one in Alberta and the other in central Mexico," says Besant, who is a snowbird who spends half the year in Mexico.

ARTS

Googling God

Colin Birnie seeks religious enlightenment in the internet in *Faith in the Machine*

BY AGNIESZKA MATEJKO

Like everyone else, when I conduct my search for God, faith and for all the other big questions in life, I do it in churches, in the silent spaces of my home or in the barren solitude of the badlands. But that's not even close to where Colin Birnie decided to look for answers. For his exhibition *Faith in the Machine* (the final visual presentation toward his M.F.A. degree) Birnie researched such personal topics in a place that would have never have occurred to me in a million years.

"I'm using the internet to find images," Birnie says. "I want [my show] to be about us, right now. I am a part of the first generation raised in a culture without all the answers, or a structure to lean on. We are devoid of an all-encompassing belief. I don't subscribe to traditional narratives; I am using painting to find my own meaning in life."

To begin his search, Birnie broke up the meaning of religion into four

basic components: belief, community, subjective experience and ritual. (These topics later became four rooms in the gallery, with each room containing paintings covering one of the main themes.) With the concept of belief as his starting point, Birnie typed the word "God" into a search engine. The images that cropped up covered every kind of human experience: the profound, the trivial, the corporate and the intensely personal. The one image that Birnie found absent, however, was the most common concept of God: the old guy

PROFILE

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with a long beard. "I did a search for the word 'God' and the one that came up [first] was Anubis," says Birnie, who made Anubis one of the first gods he painted. "It made me question the idea of who has a God, and why should a god have human form."

The second and largest room in the gallery is devoted to the theme of community. A massive painting of a swimming pool encompasses the cathedral-like gallery space—Birnie's ironic comment on the ancient practice of baptism. "Now baptism is about self-improvement, being fit and the worship of our own bodies," he says.

The darkest and most intimate

room in the gallery is devoted to the third topic: subjective religious experience. "I put the phrase 'a religious experience' into the internet search engine," Birnie says, "and it came up with over 100 images." Birnie then used these images to create 96 small sketches of all manner of religious experience; there's a Bob Dylan advertisement, people holding babies, people volunteering in Africa. "There is something fascinating about it," he says. "This says all I wanted to say in this show. There are endless opportunities for our own religious search. The search for religion has become a search in the everyday. It's not tied to someone else's idea of what it should be."

THE FINAL ROOM FORMS a stark contrast to the rest; gone is the hushed ambience of the other spaces. "What is ritual right now?" Birnie asked himself, and the answer that came to him was plastic surgery. "We want to be reborn," he says. "There are a lot of testimonials about plastic surgery on the internet. One of the things that keeps coming up is that people say, 'I want my outside to match my inside.' That's what baptism is, a physical rebirth of changes that happen inside."

In the end, Birnie discovered that technology was not only the tool in his contemporary search for "God": it was also his answer. "Everyone still believes in technology as a saviour," he says. "If we just get a computer that's a little faster, things will be great." But the speed of the computer, no matter how awe-inspiring, does not bring faster answers to the truly big questions. Despite his exhibition's title, Birnie is skeptical about anyone who places their faith in a machine. "The answers are elsewhere," he concludes, "not in technology." 

FAITH IN THE MACHINE

By Colin Birnie • FAB Gallery • To Nov 13

U of A artist puts his faith in painting

faith in the machine

By Colin Birnie

FAB Gallery

Showing until 13 November

JEREMY SHRAGGE
Arts & Entertainment Writer

In today's era of high-speed Internet, high-definition TV and digital photography, the continued relevancy of painting is by no means guaranteed. In fact, as a cultural and artistic medium, painting may be approaching obsolescence.

For fine arts graduate student Colin Birnie, conveying meaning with paint and canvas can be a challenge. "We have such a connection to the visual world now because of the way we live our lives that it's almost like we're moving beyond being able to look at static images anymore," Birnie says.

"Even photography—we flip through things—or we're on the Internet and we're clicking our mouse every five seconds because we get bored looking at the same thing. So it's a battle." Like painting, the role that religion and sacred ritual have to play in Western society is undergoing a revolution. In faith in the machine, the visual presentation of Birnie's Masters thesis now showing at the FAB Gallery, Birnie deconstructs and confronts a number of religious elements. And, of course, his medium of choice is paint.

"One thing I'm really concerned [about] is what painting means today; what painting can say about the world

"We have such a connection to the visual world now, because of the way we live our lives that it's almost like we're moving beyond being able to look at static images anymore. Even photography—we flip through things—or we're on the Internet and we're clicking our mouse every five seconds because we get bored looking at the same thing. So it's a battle."

COLIN BIRNIE, MFA PAINTING STUDENT

"We live in right now," he explains. "So I started to do some research on the Internet in terms of the images that were associated with religious ideas. And not necessarily part of Christianity or Buddhism or Islam: just aspects of our culture that related to religious ritual or belief or a community that brought people together."

The paintings themselves—mostly encaustic (pigmented wax) on canvas or paper—are arresting. Viewed from up close, the large works appear quite roughly and carelessly composed; from afar, however, the shoppiness vanishes into the ether. The images come to life with a remarkable intensity.

While some of the religious elements present in the paintings are somewhat cryptic, the connections that Birnie addresses—for example, the relationship between body modification and baptism—are not unreasonably strained. "I was doing a number of paintings with baptism, and I thought, 'You know, that's such a standard, old way of looking at it: baptism as a rebirth.' So I started looking at images of plastic surgery. And I thought, 'There's something there in terms of what we



PAINT IT THE TRUTH? Colin Birnie displays his paintings at the FAB Gallery.

want to be on the outside in relation to how we feel inside, which is baptism, right?"

"So I was thinking about using images from the Internet from plastic surgery websites that showed these distinct before-and-after images [to] see how there was something involved in the transition from one to the other that painting could explore."

Another form of bodily memor-phosis, tattooing, and its intersection with technology and ritual is explored prominently in several of the pieces on display.

According to Birnie, "...Tattooing starts off being very religious—that's the origin of tattooing. And yet there has been this huge return to this kind of tribal feeling: that you get these tattoos and this machine entering your body to mark you, and essentially—ideally—making you the person you think you should be identified as."

Even though he concedes that painting is one of the least commonly used media for assessing images in the 21st century, Birnie is not yet ready to pronounce it defunct.

"Can painting still say anything? I hope it still can."

VISUAL ARTS



Googling for God

Colin Birnie finds faith in cyber-space

FAITH IN THE MACHINE

Paintings by Colin Birnie

Opening Reception Thu, Oct 28

FAB Gallery (1-1 Fine Arts Building, U of A Campus)

CERTAIN RELIGIOUS DEVOTEES WILL tell you that their belief in a higher power cured their eyesight, or enabled them to walk again. Other folks count female mud wrestling as the pinnacle of religious experience. Local painter Colin Birnie is keenly aware of our modern world's weirdo dichotomies.

Which is why Birnie—ready to showcase his honours painting thesis, *Faith in the Machine* for the public—is so taken with the Internet. His

search for contemporary religious subject matter is often generated through a simple image search—a process that he contends yields the most honest and immediate information about our culture.

Perhaps it's the metaphor of "searching" that has so attracted his attention. *Machine* submits a re-visioning of devotional iconography: one that is aligned with our immediate folklore.

"It's gonna sound kind of pretentious," he begins, "but I really see the work as being about painting; about what painting means—right now, 2004, October 25."

One of the image searches Birnie performed was on the phrase "a reli-

gious experience." That particular phrase, "on that particular moment of that particular day," yielded over one hundred images, from portraits of Jesus to the afore-mentioned female mud wrestling. It was a potent moment for Birnie as he realized that, on that self-same day, "there were all these people using that phrase to mean so many different things."

On a deeper level, Birnie is motivated by the search for meaning, and how meaning is constructed. Acknowledging that we live in a very fragmented society, he has spent many hours considering the lexicon of the image.

Birnie points out that we are a very verbally literate society—we are bombarded with images daily, appearing anywhere from our cereal boxes in the morning to the bus we take to work and the ads we see along the way. As such, his paintings, such as a large before-and-after rendering of a woman's lip implant surgery, rely on his audience's ability to deeply contemplate and derive meaning from his chosen subjects.

To create a simulacrum of his subject, Birnie uses encaustic, an old-school painting medium of pigment and wax. Encaustic dries quickly and imparts a sculptural element, and an otherworldly glow, to the work. And, in keeping in line with Birnie's fascination with immediacy, his chosen medium allows him to better capture the actual act of painting because the drips and brush strokes are well recorded.

However, he informs, you can correct a mistake in encaustic with a simple, household blowtorch.

TASH FRYZUK

Colin Birnie: Slide List

faith in the machine

27th October to 13th November, 2004

Fine Arts Building Gallery

MFA Exhibition

#1 – Installation View
south gallery

#2 – ***The Machine is Us***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
48 x 36"
2004

#3 – ***The Head***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
48 x 48"
2004

#4 – ***The Hand***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
40 x 36"
2004

#5 – ***Reconstruction***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
48 x 36"
2004

#6 – ***God Dog***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
60 x 60"
2004

#7 – ***Site and Salvation*** (triptych)
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
24 x 48" each
2003

#8 – ***97XF11-Estimated Time of Encounter***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
60 x 96"
2004

#9 – “a religious experience” 7:21 pm (MST) December
5, 2003
wax and tar on paper (96 Drawings)
7 x 5" each
2003 - 2004

#10 – ***Cathedral of the Body***
encaustic and oil pigments on canvas
108 x 144"
2004

#11 – Installation View
east gallery

#12 – ***A New You***
encaustic, oil and tar on canvas
108 x 144"
2003

#13 – ***The Relic of Skin***
mixed media on paper (triptych)
23 x 12" each
2004

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